

**SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN TELEWORK
ADVISORY COMMITTEE (ATAC)**

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The following brief submission highlights the findings of our ARC SPIRT (now Linkage) research project entitled *The Management of Telework: An Employment and Industrial Relations Model for Australian Industry* (1999-2002) which was undertaken in collaboration with the Queensland Department of Employment, Training and Industrial Relations (now the Queensland Department of Industrial Relations) and Unisys Australia's Queensland branch. The project team's Final Report (2002) is available on-line at <<http://www.ir.qld.gov.au/reports&submissions/telework.pdf>>.

For the purposes of our research telework was defined as an arrangement where employees work from an alternative location (often from home) using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to maintain links with the usual workplace¹. Our submission should be read in light of this definition rather than the broad definition currently being used by the ATAC.

The research project included the National Telework Survey (an organisational level survey of 2528 organisations from across Australia); nine detailed case studies of organisations using telework, and; a PhD thesis which utilised some of these data and also interviews with individual teleworkers. Copies of the following published research have been provided for the information to the ATAC:

Diamond, C. & G. Lafferty (2000) 'Telework: issues for research, policy and regulation,' *Labour & Industry*, 11 (1): 115-128.

Diamond, C. (2002) 'Telework: a family-friendly arrangement?', *Labour & Industry*, 13: 1, pp. 39-54

Diamond, C. (2003) *The Impact of Telework on Work-Family Balance in Australia*, PhD thesis, University of Queensland, awarded 19 September 2003.

Lafferty, G. & G. Whitehouse (2000) 'Telework in Australia: findings from a national survey', *Australian Bulletin of Labour*, 26(3): 118-134. (Later version appears as chapter in *Organisation and Work Beyond 2000*, P. Jackson and B. Rapp (eds), Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag.)

Whitehouse, G., Diamond C. & Lafferty G. (2002) 'Assessing the benefits of telework: Australian case study evidence', *New Zealand Journal of Industrial Relations* 27:3, pp. 257-268. (Earlier version presented at the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand [AIRAANZ] conference, Queenstown NZ, February 2003)

¹ A tighter definition was used for our survey work where we were particularly interested in regular teleworkers who we defined as 'employees who regularly telework for 40 percent or more of their hours from outside the usual workplace, using information and telecommunications technology to link to the office'.

Our submission is arranged around the topics requested by ATAC in Attachment C:

- The potential social and economic benefits and disadvantages of telework;
- Cultural, regulatory, technical and/or legal factors that are enabling or preventing telework adoption; and
- Policies and actions that Government could use to encourage the adoption and effective use telework in Australia.

We would also like to offer some advice on matters of research into telework, in particular:

- The definition of telework;
- The merit of including employee representatives on the ATAC; and
- The value of using mixed research methods to uncover the complexities of telework.

TOPICS OF INTEREST TO ATAC

The potential social and economic benefits and disadvantages of telework

‘Much of what has been written about telework can be characterised as thinly-disguised promotions for the services of consultants who specialise in the design and implementation of telework programs or as journalistic embellishment’ (Diamond 2003: 1113). Typically this kind of uncritical work includes lists of the telework advantages and disadvantages ‘which are often thought-provoking but rarely detailed’ (Diamond 2003: 15). In this section we will briefly cover four potential benefits of telework, including their potential downsides.

Improved worker productivity is a popularly purported benefit of telework. Our survey revealed that increased productivity was the most frequently cited reason for introducing telework. However the case study research showed that this was rarely quantified. Many of the teleworkers with whom we spoke did get more work done when teleworking, but this was often due to work intensification and working longer hours. ‘Fewer interruptions’ was a commonly stated reason for their increased output but this often had a detrimental impact on co-workers who remained in the regular workplace.

Savings on office space and related business costs constitute another supposed benefit. The realisation of office accommodation savings requires an employee to be located permanently at home (or partial savings may come with a hot-desking arrangement) which many researchers and practitioners warn against for career and corporate identification reasons. In addition these savings for business are made at the expense of employees onto whom these costs are shifted: they take up space in their own homes, use their own electricity, telephone, computer and other office essentials (although elements may be provided by the employer or reimbursable).

The idea that telework will improve *work/family balance* through increased flexibility is another popular ‘benefit’ but one which should also be critically considered (see Diamond 2003) as studies have often shown that the flexibility associated with telework may benefits the employer to the detriment of the employee. In sum, the project’s case studies showed that:

Greater flexibility and autonomy over working-time, time saving through avoiding commuting and location of work at home did provide teleworkers with an enhanced capacity to balance work and family/caring responsibilities, although difficulties in keeping ‘work’ and ‘family’ space separate when working from home were apparent in some cases. (Final Report 2002: 4)

Telework may also have the advantage of *staff attraction and retention* (which may be associated with the desire to balance work and family). The case studies showed that ‘Teleworking appeared to be a useful strategy for staff retention, particularly for younger “e-savvy” staff, through its potential for greater hours flexibility and working-time control’ (Final Report 2002: 4). For some of the female teleworkers interviewed by Diamond (2003), the use of telework permitted or eased their paid work attachment along with considerable family caring responsibilities.

Cultural, regulatory, technical and/or legal factors that are enabling or preventing telework adoption

While our case study work (undertaken in 2000-2001) revealed some technical problems that stopped workers from optimising their use of telework, the subsequent advent of widely available and affordable broadband has the potential to address most of these issues. While many Australian employees now have the *technical ability* to telework, to assert that this possibility will or should become reality is to risk being accused of technological determinism i.e. failing to take account of other more important factors in the choice to telework.

Obviously telework is *not suited* to numerous organisations and/or jobs. The National Telework Survey found that half of the organisations which had considered using telework but had not introduced it cited ‘lack of suitability’, as did over 20 percent of organisations with regular telework (Lafferty & Whitehouse 2000: 250). As significant is the fact that many workers are *not interested* in teleworking: they prefer to maintain the physical and temporal separation of their work and home lives, they value the organisational environment as a source of motivation and information which is equipped and arranged to meet their work (and other) needs.

In organisations and jobs where telework was possible and where workers were receptive to it, one of the greatest hurdles was the *anxiety of line managers* supervising teleworkers. In the case studies we found that ‘Management of telework programs was most successful where there was evidence of a management culture based on trust; traditional forms of management based more on direct observation and control hindered effective implementation of programs’ (Final Report 2002: 4). Anxious managers tended to sabotage telework as a legitimate flexible work option, for example, by treating it as a privilege which could be revoked at any time and questioning the career commitment of those who teleworked.

The project team’s Final Report (2002: 5) contains recommendations for the development of telework programs, which include preparatory tasks, components of successful telework programs and monitoring and evaluation. Further advice is available in Whitehouse, Diamond & Lafferty (2002) including the value of monitoring and evaluating a telework pilot within an organisation before considering its more widespread introduction.

Policies and actions that Government could use to encourage the adoption and effective use telework in Australia

- Based on the findings of our research we suggest that the government should promote telework as a flexible work arrangement which may be used when it is likely to be mutually advantageous for both employees and their employers. Owing to the imposition it makes into the private sphere, employees should not be forced to telework.
- The government should provide policy frameworks and advice based on critical research and communicated through employee and employer organisations and its own relevant departments.

- The public sector should be a ‘model employer’, offering quality telework arrangements to suitable staff and monitoring and evaluating its use.
- The government should take account of the failure of the 1994 *Australian Public Service Home Based Work Interim Award* and recommend wording of a paragraph on telework, as a flexible employment option, for inclusion in enterprise bargaining agreements.
- The government must continue to provide and enforce workplace health and safety standards which also apply to the home office in the case of home-based teleworkers.
- If it wants to make telework technically possible across Australia the government must provide affordable broadband or alternative but equitable technology in remote areas.

RESEARCHING TELEWORK

The definition of telework

The working definition of telework currently used by ATAC for the purposes of consultation and other information gathering is too broad to be meaningful. Significant elements of any definition include: the use of ICTs, relationship between teleworkers and the organisation, proportion of time spent teleworking and location of telework (Diamond 2003: 8-9). Lengthy examinations of this issue are provided in Diamond (2003: 7-10, 13, 74) and Diamond & Lafferty (2000: 116-118). The definition of telework is perhaps most significant when the extent of telework is being quantified: differing definitions result in wildly different figures which will be of dubious worth and comparability.

The merit of including employee representatives on the ATAC

Currently the ATAC is made up of representative from government, employer and user groups and those with a commercial interest in the promulgation of ICTs. If the government wants to seriously consider the topic of telework, it must bring an employee representative into the group, preferably one who represents a constituency of current or likely teleworkers, such as a union officer or delegate from the Community and Public Sector Union, Finance Sector Union or Australian Services Union—Administrative and Clerical. Alternatively, a small number of teleworkers who make submissions to the consultation process and clearly have considerable experience of telework and a broad critical perspective might be invited to join the ATAC. The legitimacy of the ATAC’s findings would be enhanced by this addition.

The value of using mixed research methods to uncover the complexities of telework

It would appear that the ATAC’s data-gathering process has started well by consulting with members of the public, academia and government from across Australia. Such qualitative research will provide rich detail which we hope will be faithfully presented to and considered by ATAC. (At the same time, caution must be exercised when interpreting and/or weighting up the experiences of individual teleworkers.) Some of the shortcomings of qualitative data collection can be redressed by also examining data gained using quantitative methods. Rather than collecting its own statistical data ATAC should consider using existing quality research such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ *Household Use of Information Technology* (Cat. No. 8146.0) or *Locations of Work* (Cat. No. 6275.0), both of which examine employees with work-at-home agreements with their employers. For an examination of the telework-specific issues which complicate the gathering of accurate quantitative data see Lafferty & Whitehouse (2000: 236-239).